SEL Helps Valued Outcomes to Happen: A Series of Examples…

Who Do You Call On? Honoring All Students

By Maurice J. Elias

As we start a challenging new school year, with lots of uncertainties about vaccinations, masking, distance, and ventilation, it's especially important that all students feel welcomed and included. Since the adults in the school are equally affected by the uncertainties as students, here are some subtle things to watch out for to make sure you are being as inclusive to all of your students as possible-- including watching out for unintended biases in which side of the room we tend to look at! https://www.edutopia.org/article/who-do-you-call-rooting-out-implicit-bias

I was approached by a middle school student who said, "My teacher doesn't like me." I knew the teacher, and I couldn't conceive of him communicating something like that to a student. I said that I found it hard to imagine, and the student insisted, "He doesn't like me." I asked him how he knew. "He never looks at me." I said I thought that was surprising but would look into it.

When I sat in on a couple of classes, I saw that the student sat in the front on the far right side of the room, and the teacher looked almost exclusively to the left half of the room. I spoke to the teacher about it, and he had no idea about his tendency to look to his right. I suggested that he use a technique I learned about from UK researcher Michael Fielding and rotate asking a few students over the course of a few weeks to keep track of some of his patterns:

- Where he tended to face.
- Who does he tend to call on—male/female; race/ethnicity; disability status.
- In what parts of the room did he tend to call on students.
- With which students did he use or not use a student's name when he called on them.

The teacher spoke with the student once the issue was brought to his attention. He said the incident made him and his class more aware of how they all—teacher and students—could inadvertently insult, offend, or exclude someone without realizing it.

As we work to improve our students' social and emotional skills and help them understand how to form relationships using both words and nonverbal behaviors, it stands to reason that they will be more aware of how they are treated by their teachers, lunch aides, bus drivers, administrators, and other adults. So adults need to be more aware of what they are projecting with their actions.

Implicit Biases?

Tendencies to look left or right or call on boys more or usually call on people in the front or back of the room can be considered forms of implicit bias. Similarly, it's a form of bias to favor students of certain racial or ethnic backgrounds in the frequency of calling on them or using their names. These are not patterns we consciously plan, yet many of us have them.

As Jay Wamsted noted in a January 2021 Edutopia article, tracking is the most effective way to identify biases. Before introducing students to tracking some of the areas above, teachers would have a direct conversation with their class about these kinds of implicit biases and the benefits of tracking them honestly. This models the

idea that we all have implicit biases, and it's OK to get help in identifying them as the first step in reducing them.

While students can help track certain behaviors, other areas are less appropriate for students to monitor directly. These are areas in which biases can lead to significant differences in students' opportunities:

- Who do you speak to informally?
- Who gets to help you when you need assistance in the classroom?
- Who do you suggest for opportunities (e.g., clubs, service, extracurriculars)?
- Who do you encourage when they don't volunteer?

If teachers discover bias, it's best to confront it right away. As cognitive scientist Daniel Kahneman has shown throughout his career, we all have biases of varying kinds. It's often difficult—and ultimately pointless—to wonder how we acquired them. What matters is to identify them and then work to eliminate those we feel will be harmful to our students' success.

Participation Is the Key

When biases operate, as in the example I started with, students often give up, lose hope, disconnect, and learn less. This response to what they feel as dislike, ignoring, or outright rejection (even though this is the furthest thing from most teachers' minds) makes sense—when people don't feel their participation matters or is appreciated, it's natural to be less motivated to try, leading to less motivation to learn.
We see this, for example, with participation of girls in STEM classes. Years of bias—girls being called on less, not being given opportunities, expected to not be the best—create internalized oppression. They stop trying. So someone walking into a classroom and seeing all the male hands up and the female hands down would say, "Of course more boys are called on. They volunteer more." That's why it is so necessary to uncover and reduce biases and encourage enthusiastic classroom participation.

Class participation involves a number of social and emotional competencies, as well as character attributes such as courage, persistence, and confidence. There are ways to make it easier for more students to feel that their participation is welcome without requiring norm-breaking initiative:

- Before a class discussion, have students meet in pairs to share ideas about the topic to be discussed, or have them meet in small groups to discuss the topic and rotate having students report out a summary of the group's thoughts. Provide the questions that will be covered in the discussion, and give students a few minutes to gather their thoughts and write them down. This way, their later participation will be more like reading their ideas than having to think on the spot.
- When you put students in pairs or groups, create intentionally diverse mixes, and have a goal of students being with as many different classmates as possible.
- Articulate core values for the classroom that apply to all. This creates a set of uniform expectations that all students are believed to be capable of living up to. Explicitly holding everyone to common standards sends an important equity message, and so does ensuring that classroom and school discipline systems are firm, fair, restorative, and consistent.

By paying attention to our own patterns of encouraging classroom participation—and letting students know we are doing so and why—we take essential steps toward increasing all students' sense of value and potential. As we improve the diversity of student participation, we create the additional benefit of reducing the operation of implicit biases in students about their classmates… because biases have a way of being contagious.

This information sheet was provided by SEL4NJ, the Social-Emotional Learning Alliance of NJ, a voluntary, grass-roots organization working with schools and communities to promote social-emotional and character development and supportive, engaging, inclusive, equitable classroom and school environments for learning. Prepared by Maurice Elias, SEL4NJ Trustee and Director, Rutgers Social-Emotional and Character Development Lab. You can reach us at info@sel4nj.org and join at www.SEL4NJ.org.